

Anaya's New Mexico

Rural New Mexico in the mid-20th century had long been a land of Mexican and Native American tradition both lured by, and resistant to, civilization's advances. Hopi, Navajo, and Pueblo Indians had foraged and farmed for centuries. When the Spanish arrived in 1540, they were newcomers. But the religion they believed, the laws they imposed, and the language they brought all took root.

The Rio Grande corridor is the bedrock of the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache Indians, a spiritual setting that informs Anaya's fiction. As Anaya has said, "Into that came the Spaniards and the Mexicans with the Catholic religion, later Anglo America comes in. So you have a fascinating place where these cultures are mixing, learning from each other, and quite often in conflict." The body of Spanish and Mexican folklore, called *cuentos*, passed on orally from generation to generation, contains the basis of New Mexican values and beliefs.

Miracles and Magic in *Bless Me, Ultima*

No one in *Bless Me, Ultima* doubts the existence of mystery and magic. Miracles, signs, and symbols form a rich part of the New Mexican Catholic culture of Anaya's world, a unique setting where, for 400 years, Catholicism has thrived alongside Indian Pueblo religions.

Catholicism offers Antonio a prescribed way of seeing the world. He diligently learns his Catechism, believing that revelation will come once the body of Christ enters him

during his first Communion (Eucharist). He loves the Virgin of Guadalupe—the patron saint of his small New Mexican town—because she represents forgiveness.

Ultima's ways as a traditional healer are different. As Antonio says, "A *curandera* is a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick...And because a *curandera* had this power she was misunderstood and often suspected of practicing witchcraft herself."

The Virgin of Guadalupe (Patron Saint of Mexico)

Twelve years after Spanish explorers landed on Mexican soil, the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe occurred. In 1531, the dark-skinned mother of Jesus appeared several times to a peasant Indian man named Juan Diego, a Catholic convert. She asked to have a church built on the site. After Diego told a bishop what happened—only to be turned away—a colorful image of the Virgin was emblazoned on Diego's cloak to validate his story. This miracle led to the conversion of about nine million of Mexico's Indians to Catholicism. The Vatican recognized this miracle in 1745, and the image now hangs above the altar in the Basílica de Santa María de Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Legends in the Novel

The Weeping Woman

The origin of the legend of La Llorona (the Weeping Woman) has been part of Southwestern culture since the days of the conquistadors. Tales vary, but all report that this beautiful, frightening spirit—with long black hair and a white gown—belongs to a

cursed mother searching rivers and lakes for her children, whom she has drowned. Parents have used this story to teach their children, telling them the merciless La Llorona would drag them to a watery grave if they stay out late at night.

The Legend of the Golden Carp

Anaya created this story, which draws from Christian, Aztec, and Pueblo mythology. Similar to the Old Testament's Noah and the flood, the tale warns that unless the people stop sinning, the carp will cause a flood to purge their evil.

How *Bless Me, Ultima* Came to Be Written

"When I started writing *Bless Me, Ultima*, I was writing Antonio's story. This boy grows up in a small town, like my hometown, and deals with things that I did—fishing, school, church, and listening to the stories of the people from the community. One night when I was writing late at night, Ultima appeared to me—let me put it that way. She stood at the door and she asked me what I was doing, and I said I was writing a story. And she said that she had to be in the story. And when I asked her name she said, 'Ultima.' And that's when the novel came alive." —Excerpted from Rudolfo Anaya's interview with Dan Stone

Herbal Remedies

Juniper A small shrub that grows 4-6 feet high in the Southwest, juniper is used to cure headaches, influenza, nausea, and spider bites. Indians also burned juniper wood for feasting and ceremonial fires.

Yerba del manso Manso can be translated to mean 'calm' or 'quiet.' This herb can cure burns, colic in babies, and even rheumatism.

Oregano This herb is also used to heal sore throats and bronchitis.

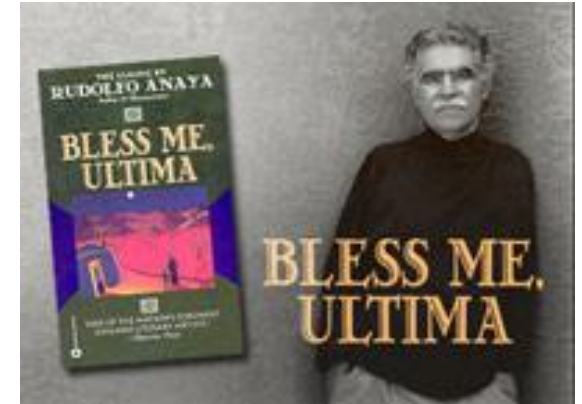
Oshá Sometimes regarded as a good-luck charm, this herb grows best in the mountains of New Mexico and Colorado. Along with its healing power, it can keep poisonous snakes away.

Discussion Questions

1. *Bless Me, Ultima* is a coming-of-age story that chronicles several rites of passage for Antonio. Which aspects of his development are universal, and which are particular to his Hispanic Catholic culture?
2. Why does the Márez family ask Ultima to live with them? Why does she think Antonio is special? Despite the conflicts between his parents and the skepticism of their neighbors, why is the family's view of Ultima the one thing upon which they can agree?
3. The novel's action begins near the close of World War II, before Antonio's three soldier-brothers return safely home to New Mexico. How important is the war to the story?
4. What makes Antonio's first day of school so difficult?
5. How does Antonio's perception of Ultima differ from the opinions of those in his town?
6. What do Antonio's dreams reveal about him? How do they change as he matures?
7. The humor in the novel usually comes from moments when the boys are playing or fighting together. What significance is there to the Christmas play, in which Horse plays the Virgin Mary and Antonio a shepherd?
8. Often the boys' games lead to violence that parallels the adult world. What happens when they force Antonio to become their priest?
9. How does the legend of the Golden Carp resemble the New Testament story of Jesus Christ, or the Mexican story of the Virgin of Guadalupe?
10. What happens when Antonio finally takes his long-awaited first Communion?
11. Antonio witnesses the deaths of several adults and one of his childhood friends. How does the latter death, especially, affect his sense of the world?
12. At the end of the novel, a radical thought comes to 8-year-old Antonio: Is a new religion possible? What do you think is the answer to his question?
13. How would you answer Antonio's final question: "What dream would form to guide my life as a man?" Does he choose the life of a farmer, *vaquero*, priest or something else?
14. In your experience, does the novel reinforce or revise stereotypes of Hispanic culture?

Library Book Club

Discussion



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